

# A BUCKAROO STEW OF FACT AND LEGEND

# The Pony Express

By ROWE FINDLEY

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Photographs by CRAIG AURNES

**H**ERE HE COMES! Away across the endless dead level of the prairie a black speck appears against the sky . . . sweeping toward us nearer and nearer . . . a whoop and a hurrah . . . a wave of the rider's hand . . . and man and horse burst past our excited faces, and go winging away like a belated fragment of a storm!"

Thus Mark Twain, from a westbound stage, beheld a Pony Express rider, and thus the rider has galloped into history, hat brim bent by the wind, horizon bound to a staccato of dust-digging hoofbeats.

The Pony Express, like other episodes that have become epic, looms taller than truth, a buckaroo stew of fact and legend. And even the facts have a legendary flavor. Take, for instance, that much quoted ad of March 1860, when the Pony Express company was seeking hired help for its venture:

**"WANTED—YOUNG, SKINNY, WIRY FELLOWS not over eighteen. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred."**

CENTRAL OVERLAND CALIFORNIA  
AND  
**PIKE'S PEAK EXPRESS CO.**



**PONY EXPRESS!**

FROM SAINT JOSEPH, MO.,  
TO  
**SAN FRANCISCO**  
**IN TEN DAYS!**

(FIFTEEN DAYS DURING WINTER.)

Passes through, and takes Letters to the following points:  
Fort Kearney, Fort Laramie, Fort Union, Grand Salt Lake City, Camp Floyd, Virginia City, Omaha City, Placerville  
and Sacramento City.

**CHARGES.**

Letters not exceeding 1/2 oz. . . . . \$2.50  
" over 1/2 oz. and not exceeding 1 1/2 oz. . . . . 5 00  
and so on, always to be pre-paid.

**AGENTS.**

J. H. Simpson, New York; Oak, Chandler & Co., Boston;  
W. H. Worster, Chicago; Russell & Allen, St. Louis; J. F.  
Gibbs, Washington City.  
St. Joseph Office at Palace Hotel.

HISTORY DISPUTES WHETHER BILLY RICHARDSON (TOP LEFT) OR JOHNNY FRY (TOP RIGHT) RODE THE FIRST LEG OF THE PONY EXPRESS WESTWARD. SEATED: BROTHER RIDERS CHARLEY AND GUS CLIFF.

The man who worded that ad had sized up the enterprise as a dangerous business, and he was, in fact, correct. Before it was two months old, an Indian war flamed across hundreds of miles of Utah Territory, destroying relay stations, stock, and 17 lives, including one to three riders, depending on whose facts you accept. The bravest death is credited to an orphan, age 14.

For another instance, one William F. Cody recalled earning his spurs as a pony rider at 15, chapter one in the life story of Buffalo Bill. James Butler Hickok earned the name "Wild Bill" in a controversial shoot-out while in the employ of the Pony Express company; and a spunky lad named Elijah Nicholas "Nick" Wilson survived a barbed arrow in his skull and enough other near-hair-raising adventures

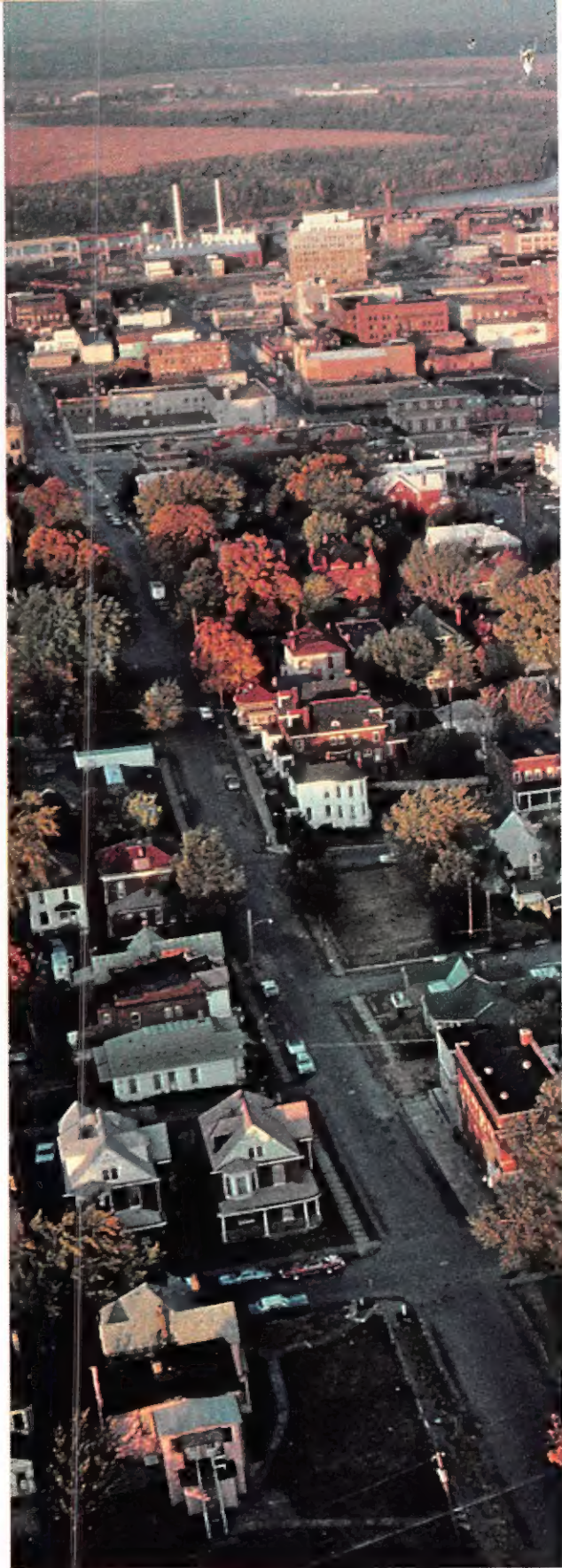
to frazzle the inventions of a dime novelist like Ned Buntline.

Other facts rein the pony rider back from his hell-for-leather gallop. There is the fact that he had to average only ten miles an hour to make schedule, that in darkness or uphill

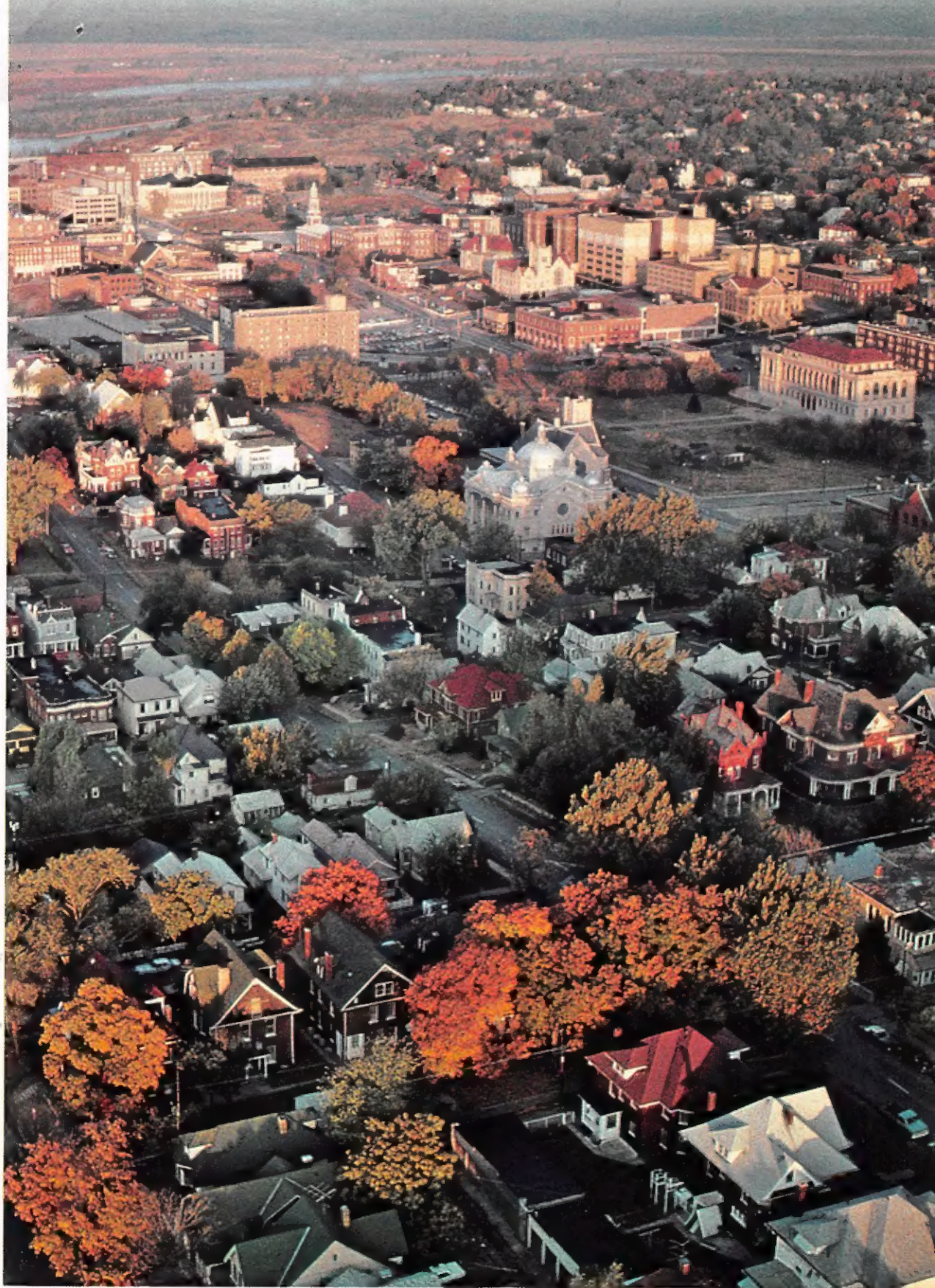


PATEE HOUSE MUSEUM, ST. JOSEPH

**F**AR EDGE of settled country in 1860, St. Joseph, Missouri, marked the westernmost reach of rail and telegraph. Distant California and Oregon hungered for news from the East, but the mail could take as long as six weeks by packet via Panama, as little as 21 days via the Butterfield Stage from St. Louis. To cut this lag, Russell, Majors, and Waddell, freighters and stage-line operators, began the Pony Express on April 3, 1860. Averaging only ten days from St. Jo to Sacramento, the feat was hailed with superlatives. The wide Missouri (*above*) posed the trail's first barrier, but a ferry eased the rider across. Ahead lay 157 relay stations. One of the few not built by the company, the Hollenberg Ranch station in Kansas (*below*), is still preserved on its original site. Modern St. Jo (*right*) takes pride in its Pony Express role, part of a lusty history begun when Joseph Robidoux founded a fur-trading post there in 1826.











**M**ESSENGERS of momentous events, the riders brought news of a nation sliding toward civil war. Word of Lincoln's election (*below*) went to Julesburg, Colorado, where a branch of the Pony Express hastened it to a Denver newspaper. The ponies

sped Lincoln's first Inaugural Address to California in seven days and 17 hours, a record remembered as the "lightning express." Vast lonely stretches still mark the trail, as a rider in Nevada (*above*) discovers during a 1979 rerun from Julesburg to Sacramento.







system of horsemen riding in relays: the Pony Express. For more than a decade the central route had suffered a bad name from the snowbound Donner party's resort to cannibalism to survive a Sierra winter.

"When Russell outlined the plan to Majors and Waddell, they both objected that such a scheme could never pay expenses," Miss Johnston told me. "But Russell said Senator Gwin could all but guarantee the federal mail contract—and besides, Russell had given his word, and that was that!"

Destiny could hardly have drawn together three partners more diverse. Conservative William B. Waddell held the reins of finance, and ramrod Alexander Majors kept the ox trains and stages rumbling on schedule by brandishing a Bible rather than a six-gun.

"The Bible was his way of meeting the ruffianism so common among the freighters and stage drivers," Louisa Johnston said. Every rider had to swear that "while I am an employee of Russell, Majors, and Waddell,

I will, under no circumstances, use profane language; that I will drink no intoxicating liquors; that I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm. . . . So help me God."

Having sworn and signed, the new hand found himself the owner of a Bible, leather-bound and gold engraved, "Presented by Russell, Majors, & Waddell."

There is dissenting opinion on the efficacy of putting Bibles in the hands of bullwhackers. Adventurer-scholar Sir Richard Burton, stagecoaching west in 1860, noted that "I scarcely ever saw a sober driver. . . ."

But the manning of 1,840 miles of trail in little more than two months was the miraculous feat of sober, hardworking men. On January 29, 1860, the Pony Express was only a dream. On April 3 it was an off-and-running reality with 157 relay stations, placed five to twenty miles apart, with 400 horses, some eighty young riders, plus station keepers, stock tenders, route superintendents, and shuttling supply wagons.

Once a week couriers dashed west and east; later the runs became semiweekly.

To protect the precious mail—at first carried at \$5 a half ounce, later as low as \$1—the company used a new device called a *mochila*, Spanish for knapsack.

"It was a rectangular leather apron, with cantinas, or pockets, in the four corners, and it was designed to fit over a saddle," Don Reynolds explained, showing me a replica in his St. Jo stables museum. "Only the rider's weight held it on the horse; he could whisk it off in seconds for a change of ponies."

History records that *mochila*, saddle, and bridle weighed only 13 pounds. Many riders were teenagers who wouldn't tip the scales at 130 pounds. And the horses were animals bred to the frontier—mostly mustangs.

It was a little bay mare, saddled and skitish, that waited in St. Jo 120 years ago to carry that first *mochila* westward. From the lamplit stable into the April dusk strode a wiry youth in fancy buckskins and boots, and his name was. . . .

"With so much fame riding with that first westbound rider, you'd think there would be no question about who he was," Don Reynolds told me. "But that is not the case. Was it Billy Richardson or Johnny Fry? Accounts disagreed, and the argument was on."

A cannon signaled the steamboat ferry that the pony rider was clattering toward Levee Street and the wharf. Pressure was up and lines were being cast off even as the courier galloped up the gangway. To cheers and a steam-throated whistle, the ferry's wooden-toothed drive wheel dug water toward the Missouri River's Kansas shore.

### Too Late to Stay in the Smith Hotel

To follow that 1860 rider galloping into darkness, I crossed the U. S. 36 bridge and drove past little Elwood, Kansas, where he landed, across the Missouri's rich bottomland, through bustling Troy under the valley's west bluffs, up winding timbered valleys to the West's high rolling plains.

In Seneca, some seventy miles west of St. Jo, that first rider could look forward to a larrupin' good meal and soft bed at the Smith Hotel, the first home station westbound, where another rider waited. I rode into town looking for the Smith Hotel, but found that I was about five years too late.



A ramshackle eyesore it had been declared, and down had come the century-old walls. But hope is not lost for those who prize history. Jim Markley, the stepson of Amos Smith, who is grandson of hotel builder John Smith, told me he had keyed and saved every beam and joist, door and window frame for someday reassembly.

Winter's first snow blurred the trail signs between Beattie and Marysville as I drove west to the old Hollenberg Ranch near Hanover, now a Kansas state historical park.

"This is the only unaltered station still on its original site," Floyd Severin, the caretaker, told me. Gerat Henry Hollenberg, who began life near Hannover, Germany, reached Cottonwood Creek in 1857, at the end of a dream-chasing route via the goldfields of California, Australia, and Peru. From creek-bank groves he hewed walnut trees for a lasting home, and he helped found nearby Hanover. "He was already here when the Pony Express came along," Floyd explained. "So the agents gave him a contract to run a relay station."

The sun beamed warmth, and snowbanks





ANDREW J. RUSSELL, COURTESY THE OAKLAND MUSEUM, OAKLAND, CALIF.

**H**OOFBEATS of the ponies echoed only in memory when this view of the Weber Station site in Utah's Echo Canyon was photographed in 1868 (above). Poles mark the first

transcontinental telegraph, which killed the Express in October 1861. Running a ranch astride the pony route, the David Bagleys (below) preserve history of Utah's Willow Springs Station.

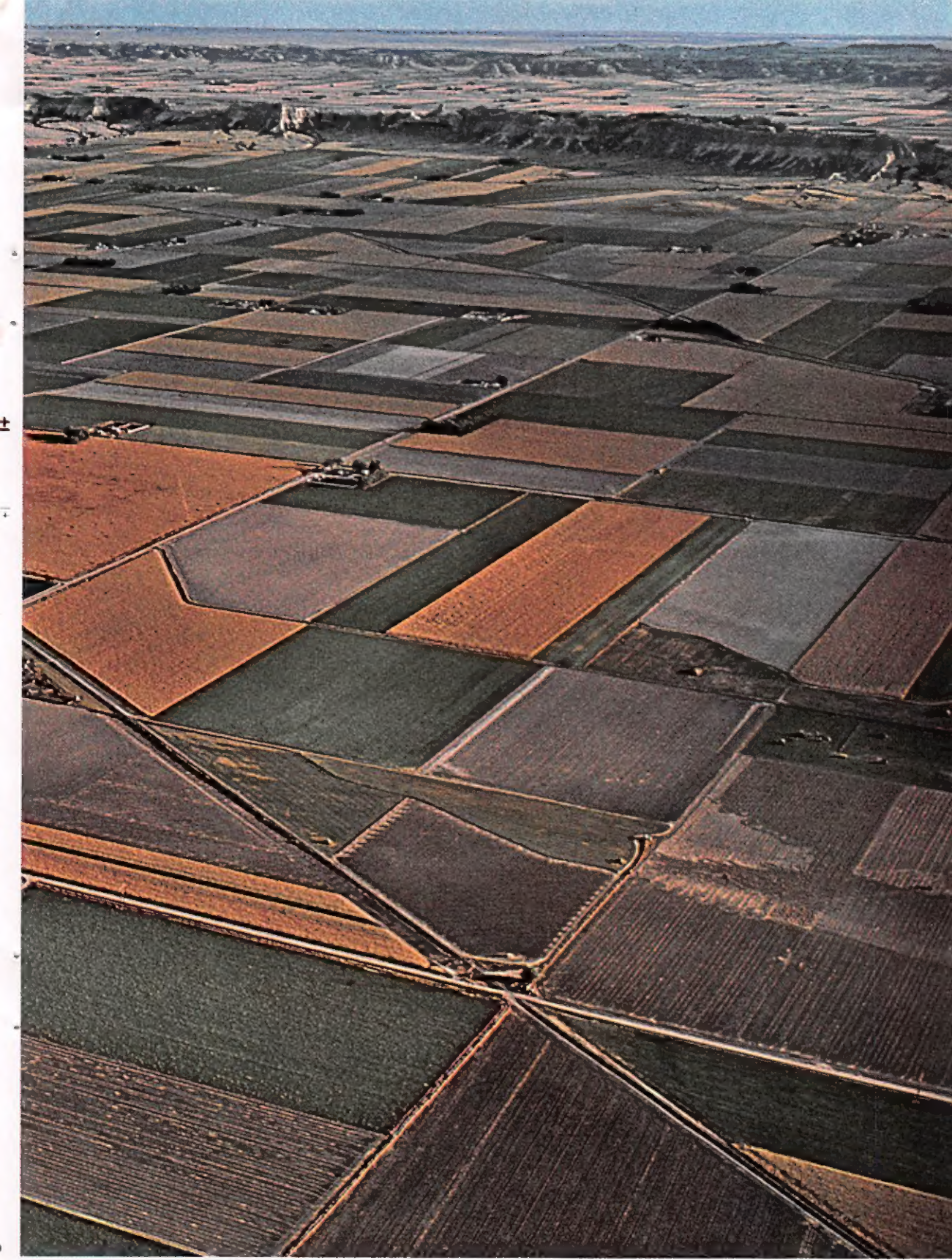






*A land rejuvenated, fields near Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, were denuded when*





*the livestock of pioneers moving westward overgrazed the valley of the Platte.*



*A staunch Mormon, early pathfinder, and superintendent of the Pony Express trail from Salt Lake City to Nevada's Robert's Creek.*



*Maps show the traditional Pony Express route, which*

### **Between Fort Laramie and Great Salt Lake, riders whipped across high**

shrank to islands as I steered northwestward into Nebraska's far-sloping hills. Stream-side thickets and a broad trench that was once the Oregon Trail mark the site of Rock Creek Station and James Butler Hickok's transfiguration into the deathless Wild Bill.

A modest flair for wildness had already put its brand on him; in fact, the story goes that the company had given him light duty as a stock tender at Rock Creek to favor his recovery from a wild affair in Colorado, a hand-to-hand with a cinnamon bear.

A week after Independence Day, 1861, came his legendary shoot-it-out with the "McCanles gang." By one account Hickok single-handedly felled ten desperadoes; by more believable court records he killed

David McCanles and winged two others, who were finished off by Hickok sidekicks.

Passing the lone graves of pioneer father George Winslow and pioneer wife Susan Hail, Oregon Trail casualties, I moseyed up the Little Blue Valley, then veered northerly over broad highlands to intercept the grand valley of the Platte just east of historic Fort Kearny, once a Pony Express station.

Here the several fingers of the Oregon and California Trails—from Westport, Fort Leavenworth, St. Jo, Nebraska City, and Council Bluffs—at last became one, spilling into the Platte Valley, that great palm of the plains that leads ever westward and gently upward some 400 miles, into high, wide Wyoming to the continent's backbone.





plateaus, threaded deep canyons, and braved wind-wracked South Pass.

Platte Valley historian Merrill Mattes notes that more than a third of a million men, women, and children trudged and jolted westward in the mid-19th century. During summer migration months in 1860 and '61, the pony riders threaded their way through an estimated 20,000 "pilgrims," their wagons and herds, plus buffalo and Indians. Along the way thousands died of cholera, smallpox, or other ills, and a few hundred fell to Indian attacks; unmarked graves, conservatively ten to the mile, seed the trail with tragedy.

Solitude seemed Fort Kearny's lot when I arrived early on a bright chill Veterans Day, for not another soul did I see in the partly restored compound, a Nebraska state historic

park. But soon I had company, not hunters of history but of deer, for this was the season's opening day. In a busy hour Duane Arp of the state game and parks commission checked in six whitetails.

While Duane tagged, I talked with Assistant Park Superintendent Gene Hunt about how amazed the pony riders would be at the sight of the Platte Valley today—a rich broad ribbon of forest, thicket, and marsh bordered by bountiful grainfields.

"I saw some sandhill cranes this morning," Gene said. "You missed the whooping cranes by two weeks."

Six score years ago even a tree was something to talk about. Spring floods fed by Rocky Mountain snowmelt, late summer



fires, and countless thousands of campfires consumed the scant stands.

Just up the trail a piece, at North Platte, Nebraska, stands the enshrined home of a man whose life was a prime instance of stampeding repute: Buffalo Bill—bison hunter for railroad builders, scout for the Army, Indian fighter, Wild West showman, dime-novel hero, boyhood's eternal king on a white horse.

"And he started as a Pony Express rider," Tom Morrison is fond of saying. Tom directs an able staff that welcomes visitors from all over the world to Scout's Rest Ranch, built in 1886 by Buffalo Bill at the peak of his show-business career. Nebraska preserves it as a historic park. I admired the lofty red barn that stabled Bill's prize mounts, and a display of his Wild West posters—circus art featuring warbonneted braves, swaying stagecoaches, and a buck-skinned Bill in full gallop.

Fatherless with mother and sisters in need, young Billy Cody was hired by the kindly Alexander Majors as a courier for his firm's wagon trains, then, at 15, as a Pony

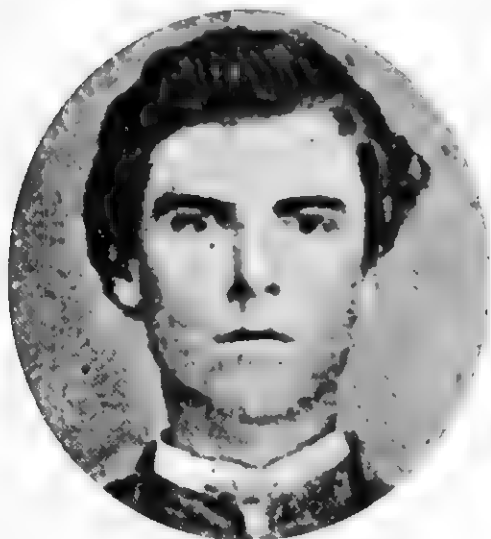
Express rider. Later Cody would write:

"One day when I galloped into Three Crossings, my home station, I found that the rider who was expected to take the trip out . . . had been killed; and that there was no one to fill his place. I did not hesitate for a moment to undertake an extra ride of eighty-five miles to Rocky Ridge, and I arrived . . . on time. I then turned back and rode to Red Buttes, my starting place . . . a distance of 322 miles."

Heroic enough for any lad just turned 15, but Bill's greatest contribution to the Pony Express came years later, in the opinion of biographer Don Russell: "For three decades a representation of the Pony Express was a spectacle at every performance of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. No other act was more consistently on its program. . . ."

And while Buffalo Bill gave it fame, others gave it notoriety. A chief case in point was Bill's boss and Pony Express division chief, Joseph Alfred "Jack" Slade.

To most chroniclers of his deeds, he is simply Slade, the reputed killer of 26 men. Mark Twain accords him several pages of his book



**D**OING A MAN'S JOB, the riders, mostly jockey-weight teenagers, proved their grit. William Cody (above), later known as Buffalo Bill, recalled that at age 15 he rode 322 miles after a relief rider died. Thomas Owen King (right) at 20 lost the trail in stirrup-deep snow, then found it again.



*Roughing It.* In due course Mark's stagecoach reached Rocky Ridge Station, and the awed traveler found himself at table with "the actual ogre," but also found him "so friendly and so gentle-spoken that I warmed to him in spite of his awful history. . . . The coffee ran out. At least it was reduced to one tincupful, and Slade was about to take it when he saw that my cup was empty. He politely offered to fill it, but . . . I politely declined. I was afraid he had not killed anybody that morning, and might be needing diversion. . . . But nothing of the kind occurred. We left him with only twenty-six dead people to account for. . . ."

#### Teaching a Deadly Lesson

The accounting included one Jules Reni, for whom Julesburg, Colorado, is named. Jules was a station keeper for Russell, Majors, and Waddell. The story goes that he had taken to consorting with renegades who seemed to know just when to hold up a company stagecoach. So the company fired him, but he refused to vacate. Slade was dispatched to "evict" him, Jules got off the first

shot from behind a door, and round one ended with Slade intent on convalescence.

Finally Slade captured Jules, left him hog-tied to a corral post overnight, then filled him with lead by practiced degrees, starting with the extremities and working toward the vitals. When finally Jules sagged dead, Slade cut off his ears, nailing one to the corral post as a warning and tanning the other for use as a watch fob.

"And maybe the Pony Express would have failed without men like Slade," Paul Henderson speculated when we talked one November day in his library in Bridgeport, Nebraska. From Julesburg, on the South Platte in Colorado, the trail veers back Nebraska way along Lodgepole Creek, then across high windmilled rangeland toward Paul's hometown by the North Platte. Until his recent death at 83, Paul had spent every spare moment filling a basement room with floor-to-ceiling shelves of books, journals, maps, and photographs that document the look and events of the Oregon and the Pony Express Trails, collected during a lifetime of tracing those historic routes.

*Planning to wed, Richard Erastus "Ras" Egan (right) at 19 asked for a furlough, and was excused from only one ride. Charley Cliff, 17 (below and page 44), found his plains route boring, but years later helped a wagon train fight off Indians.*



BUFFALO BILL HISTORICAL CENTER, CODY, WYO. (FAR LEFT), AND PONY EXPRESS STABLES MUSEUM









I mulled Paul's premise concerning Slade, and a pattern of character found focus in my mind: All chief figures in the Pony Express story—from Majors to Slade to Buffalo Bill—were types undismayed by quick triggers or long odds. In a word, they had grit.

### Don't Look for an Early Spring

From Bridgeport west, the Great Plains give way to buttes and spires and mesas and finally to the thrustings of the Rocky Mountains. For the pony rider this geographic graduation was indexed by familiar landmarks: blocky Courthouse Rock, the 325-foot spire of Chimney Rock, table-topped Scotts Bluff, horizon-held Laramie Peak. By the time I reached Fort Laramie, today a national historic site, I had mushed through two snows, and a third was a-brewing. I would defer travel farther west until spring, an option not open to pony riders.

In May I headed for Wyoming's South Pass, where the riders crested the Continental Divide, but was turned back by the season's worst blizzard. I asked a grizzled native when spring could be expected, and his reply was profound: "We only have two seasons here—winter and July."

I didn't wait for July, but wheeled back to South Pass on June 7. I topped the divide in a sleety barrage that was erasing the Wind River peaks from the skyline.

Descending below the fury, I stopped for a breather, not far from where a monument marks "the parting of the ways," with one trail heading for Oregon, the other for California over the route of the pony riders. Nearby I saw a small station wagon and beside it a young couple standing, in earnest embrace. "We're celebrating our survival," the man said, pointing back at the snow-whipped pass. "When the car began to slow down going downhill, even when I gave it the gas, I knew we were in trouble."

South Pass country is still short on roads and people, and so I was delighted to discover an experienced guide in Charley Wilson, son of Pony Express rider Nick Wilson. In younger days Charley had been a professional hunter in the area, and now he guided me along the lonely pony trail. I exulted in the great grassy sweeps of hills, still home to wild horses and thousands of antelope. And we cautiously negotiated half a dozen

marshy fords, Charley explaining it was no problem at all to get a car stuck—but sometimes a lengthy problem to get it out. What was the longest you were ever stuck? I asked. Two weeks, he replied.

Our talk drifted to the life and deeds of his father, Elijah Nicholas Wilson. When Nick was a boy in frontier Utah, he ran away and lived for two years with the Shoshone tribe of Washakie, becoming that chief's foster brother. When the Pony Express began, Nick, 18, signed on as a rider. The horses he rode were memorable for their orneriness. Later he wrote: "Generally just as soon as the hostler could lead them in and out of the stable without getting his



PONY EXPRESS STABLES MUSEUM

**L**IVING LINK to history, Charley Wilson (facing page) shares stories he heard from his father, Nick Wilson (above). When the Indian war flared, Pony Express rider Nick, then 18, helped fight off attacks and defend corrals, and almost died when an arrow lodged in his forehead; in later years he usually wore a hat, even indoors, to hide the scar.





FORT LARAMIE ARCHIVES





**W**AY STATION for the trail weary, Fort Laramie (above) was a relay point, where a rider changed horses and rode onward. Unlike most Pony Express stations, Laramie offered a feast of tempting diversions: chewing tobacco and smoked oysters, troop reviews and Virginia reels, and an endless stream of pioneers. Though Indian strife flamed elsewhere, these Sioux tribesmen (left) came to smoke for peace and negotiate a treaty. Portraying a cavalryman, Ellis Lefevre (right) helps re-create the past at Fort Laramie, now a national historic site.





head kicked off, they were considered broke. . . ."

They were mostly those western mustangs, good for fast getaways from Indians, in 1860 a pony rider's first priority. In May the Paiutes, numbering perhaps 8,000, rose in holy war to chase the white man from what today is most of Nevada and a slice of Utah. War parties attacked ranches, wagon trains, and stragglers. Along 300 miles of trail, about half the Pony Express stations came under attack, several were burned, and some 17 employees were killed.

Nick Wilson knew the peril and the fighting. He helped a station withstand a three-day siege and fought off night forays on station corrals. He was having dinner at Spring Valley Station when Indian raiders tried to drive off the horses. Nick and friends gave chase:

"I was ahead of the other two boys, and as I ran around a large cedar, one of the Indians, who had hidden behind a tree, shot me in the head. . . . The arrow struck . . . about two inches above the left eye. The other two boys. . . . tried to pull the arrow out, but the shaft came away and left the flint spike in my head. Thinking that I would surely die, they rolled me under a tree and started for the next station as fast as they could go. There they got a few men and came back the next morning to bury me. . . ."

They found him still alive. He lay in a coma for 18 days, and was left with recurring severe headaches, an unsightly deep scar, and a habit of hiding it under his hat.

Westward through the country Nick fought in, I wound into Nevada. Beyond an 8,000-foot pass, I crossed the Steptoe Valley and climbed into treacherous Egan Canyon.

The canyon honors Howard Egan, a good Mormon, early pathfinder, and superintendent of the Pony Express trail from Salt Lake City to Robert's Creek in Nevada. Two of his sons, Howard R. and Richard Erastus, carried the pony mail.

Paiute warriors attacked the Egan Canyon Station, and would have slain all defenders but for the bugled charge of a troop of bluecoats. On a knoll above the juniper-grown station site, I lingered in a desert cemetery, where weathered pickets and nameless crosses mark a few lonely graves. Here lie, according to legend, the bluecoats

who died in the defense of Egan Station.

Some stories have it that one grave is that of perhaps the bravest pony rider of them all—Billy Tate, an orphan.

Billy, only 14, was carrying the pony mail near Ruby Valley when the Paiute war erupted. A dozen braves rode him down to a desperate stand behind a rock. Friends later found him, pierced by many arrows, seven of his attackers dead before him. Surprisingly, the slain Billy still had his scalp. A witness wrote: "They respected courage. . . . They didn't touch the mochila."

### On the Trail of Tragedy

Westward from Egan Station, the route crosses Nevada country almost as empty today as it was during the pony's lonely rides. Evergreened ranges alternate with broad valleys, most of them desert dry but a few, like the Ruby, set with lakes or marshes fed by snowmelt streams. Here the Indian war took its greatest toll.

A rough stone records the tragedy at Dry Creek Station: "John Applegate, Ralph Lozier, killed by Indians, 1860." The slab dates from our own times, erected by the Dameles—father Peter, sons Benny and the late Peter Jason. They own the ranch on which the old station stood, in a turquoise-speckled valley below Eagle Butte.

What made them think they had found the grave of the two station tenders? "We dug into it," Benny said, "and just a foot or so down we found the remains of two bodies, one on top of the other, with a head bone at either end. One skull had a hole in it."

Benny was shouting over a wind strong enough to be leaned into, and I asked if it often blew like that. "It may start one morning," Benny said, "and blow for two months. Then, one morning it stops, and you walk out the door and fall down."

I headed into the wind toward western Nevada and heard history echo and re-echo its Indian-war theme: station burned, the keepers slain or fled, the stock driven off.

It was in that grim context that "Pony Bob" Haslam started his famous ride in May of 1860 from Friday's Station near Lake Tahoe. His eastward gallop was routine as far as Carson City, which he found full of wild rumors but devoid of relief ponies. He pushed on to Buckland's, which was to have



been the end of his 75-mile stint, and discovered a further problem: His relief rider refused to ride. Station keeper W. C. Marley offered Bob a \$50 bonus if he would fill in:

"Within ten minutes, when I had adjusted my Spencer rifle, which was a seven-shooter, and my Colt's revolver, with two cylinders ready for use in case of emergency, I started. From the station onward it was a lonely and dangerous ride of 35 miles, without a change, to the Sink of the Carson. I arrived there all right, however, and pushed on to Sand Springs, through an alkali bottom and sand hills, 30 miles farther, without a drop of water all along the route. At Sand Springs I changed horses and continued on to Cold Springs, a distance of 37 miles. Another change and a ride of 30 more miles brought me to Smith Creek. Here I was relieved by J. G. Kelly. I had ridden 190 miles, stopping only to eat and change horses."

In only 18 hours, that made it the fastest run of record. But Bob's work was not yet done. He'd had only a few hours rest when the westbound mail arrived, and he had to climb into the saddle again:

"When I arrived at Cold Springs to my horror I found that the station had been attacked by Indians, the keeper killed, and all the horses taken away. I decided in a moment what course to pursue—I would go on. I watered my horse, having ridden him 30 miles on time, he was pretty tired, and started for Sand Springs, 37 miles away. It was growing dark, and my road lay through heavy sagebrush, high enough in some places to conceal a horse. I kept a bright lookout, and closely watched every motion of my poor pony's ears, which is a signal for danger in Indian country. . . . stillness of the night and the howling of the wolves and coyotes made cold chills run through me at times; but I reached Sand Springs. . . . Before leaving, I advised the station keeper to come with me to the Sink of the Carson. . . . He took my advice, and so probably saved his life, for the following morning [the station] was attacked."

Across the Sink of the Carson and into the dusk Haslam rode on. At Buckland's, Mr. Marley doubled the bonus to \$100, and Pony Bob galloped onward to Friday's Station, his starting point: "I had traveled 380 miles within a few hours of schedule time, and



**N**ATURE'S TOTEM, the 325-foot spire of Chimney Rock in Nebraska told pony riders and frontiersmen they had crossed the plains, that mountains lay ahead.

was surrounded by perils on every hand."

Though other riders rode extra relays amid similar perils, Pony Bob's feat ranks at the top for distances and dangers conquered in a brief span of time.

#### Into a Land of Rugged Splendor

Now glad grandeur met my gaze—cobalt Lake Tahoe mirroring the sky-filling Sierra Nevada. My guide on this final leg into Sacramento, U. S. District Judge Sherrill Halbert, was patient when my sentences trailed off, lost to the arresting splendor of the country he knew so well.

Where I now saw an alpine meadow of





**O**N THE TRAIL of the past, Utah rancher Curtis Moore (above) went looking for a stagecoach strongbox lost in 1860 but found spools of wire left over from the first transcontinental telegraph. At the Damele ranch in Nevada, where Indians killed two station hands, a barn (right) stores gear a pony rider would know.



buttercups, he enabled me to see it through the snow-dazed eyes of Warren Upson on the blizzardy morning of April 4, 1860.

"Upson was the second rider out of Sacramento on the original eastbound run," Judge Halbert explained. A lifetime of pursuing the Pony Express story had branded the details in his memory. "The start in California coincided with one of the worst storms in history. Sam Hamilton had left Sacramento at 2:45 a.m. in a torrent of rain that turned the roads into quagmires. Five hours and 16 minutes later, he had ridden six ponies a distance of over 60 miles and climbed 4,000 feet into the Sierra foothills to deliver the mochila to Warren Upson at Sportsman's Hall.

"Rain had changed to sleet before Upson

took over. Climbing higher, he fought blinding snow and drifts that hid the trail. He finally dismounted and broke trail to get through. Beyond Woodford's Station the snow turned to rain. At Genoa he was provided with a fresh mount to carry the mail on to Carson City, the end of his ride. In a little over 12 hours he had traveled more than a hundred miles, and the first eastbound run had met its sternest test."

Just ten days later, that same Sam Hamilton who had carried the first mail east spurred westward to Sacramento with the first mochila from St. Jo. At Sutter's Fort an escort of mounted citizenry enveloped the foam-flecked pony in a mobile tumult.

"Almost simultaneously," said the



*Sacramento Daily Union*, "from the church towers and engine houses . . . rang out a merry peal of bells. A cannon . . . sent forth its noisy welcome. . . . Amidst the firing and shouting, and waving of hats and ladies' handkerchiefs, the pony—the veritable pony—was seen coming at a rattling pace down J Street. . . . Such a scene—both for comicality and becoming enthusiasm—our city has never, perhaps, witnessed."

Soon the mail had been sorted and was on its way aboard the Sacramento River steamer *Antelope* to San Francisco. There a token rider and pony landed amid the welcoming uproar of bands, bells, and gunpowder.

And Sacramento and San Francisco had news from the East that was only ten days

old. Californians savored a new and reassuring sense of closeness with the nation.

A sense of closeness was soon to come to me, not through letters from home but with a horse. Judge Halbert told me of a four-day Pony Express rerun from Salt Lake City to Sacramento, set for the July 1-4 upcoming. "The schedule matches the speed of the original Pony Express," he said.

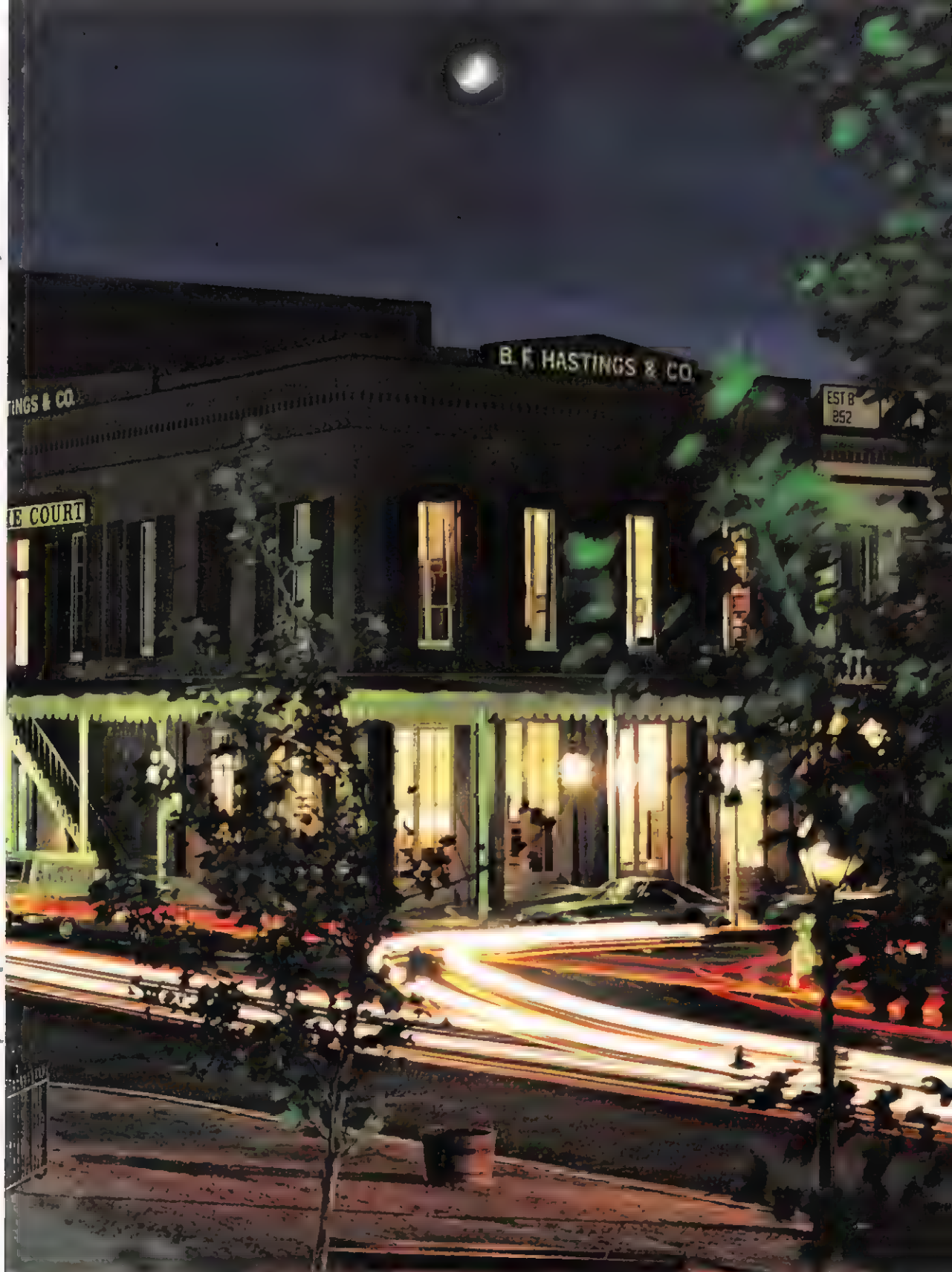
So I phoned Malcolm McFarland, a California Highway Patrol officer who devotes off-duty hours to perpetuating the Pony Express story through the National Pony Express Association. I asked to go along. "Why don't *you* be a rider?" he responded.

At 8 a.m. on July 1, Utah Governor Scott Matheson wished well to the first rider, who





*Trail's end: In restored Old Sacramento, a bronze rider heads for the*



*building that held the western headquarters of the Pony Express.*





**Highest peaks and worst Indian attacks plagued the western third of the trail.**

straddled a mochila full of commemorative mail and clattered away from the old Tribune Building near Temple Square. Using truck-drawn horse trailers as mobile relay stations, riders from Utah, Nevada, and California leapfrogged the mail across the desert through light and darkness and galloped into Sacramento four days later, arriving only two minutes behind schedule.

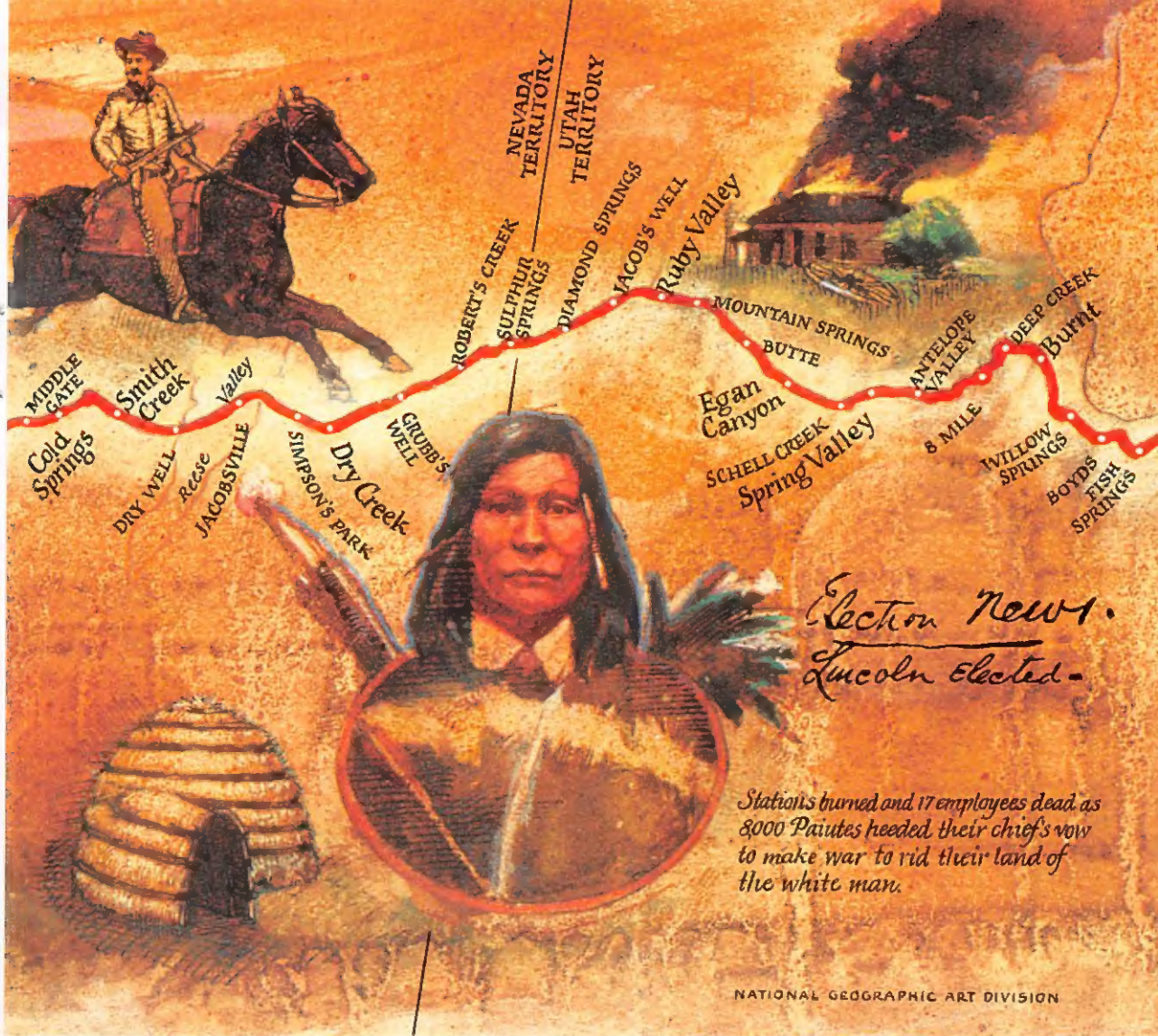
I became a pony rider one midnight in a canyon called Overland in western Utah—the place where attacking Indians had set fire to the relay station so that it was ever after called Burnt Station. Walt Allen volunteered his “easy riding” Wonnie, a quarter horse, for my four uphill miles. Like the transient lights of the horse-trailer convoy

strung out behind me, my thoughts flickered between a present concerned with pulsing saddle burns and a past filled with brave boys who could ride a hundred miles and trust their horses to find the way in nights too dark for human eyes. And the same Milky Way they knew raced with me, the same polestar danced over my right shoulder.

One postscript on the rerun: It included a test between the Pony Express and the U. S. Mail, and the pony won by a day.

But the best that man and horse could do in 1861 fell sadly behind the feats of a mechanical rival. From the earliest weeks of the Pony Express, line crews were setting poles for the first transcontinental telegraph. “And with few exceptions, they





*Section News.  
Lincoln Elected.*

*Station is burned and 17 employees dead as 8000 Paiutes headed their chief's vow to make war to rid their land of the white man.*

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ART DIVISION

### **The Pony Express dealt its founders financial ruin but lasting fame.**

strung the wire along the same route followed by the Pony Express," Keith Mulcahy of Fallon, Nevada, told me.

"The telegraph project was a race by crews building east and west to see who could get to Salt Lake City first," Keith said. The Missouri crew under Edward Creighton got there October 18, 1861, the Californians under James Gamble six days later.

The first message eastward assured President Lincoln of California's loyalty to the Union. In mere minutes it dot-dashed across geography that had taken days to pass under the ponies' striving hooves. Within a week the Pony Express completed its final runs and passed into history, victim of the first feeble voice of the electronic age.

But not before it had served its founders bittersweet portions of fame and misfortune. In 18½ months, by most estimates, the enterprise lost some \$200,000.

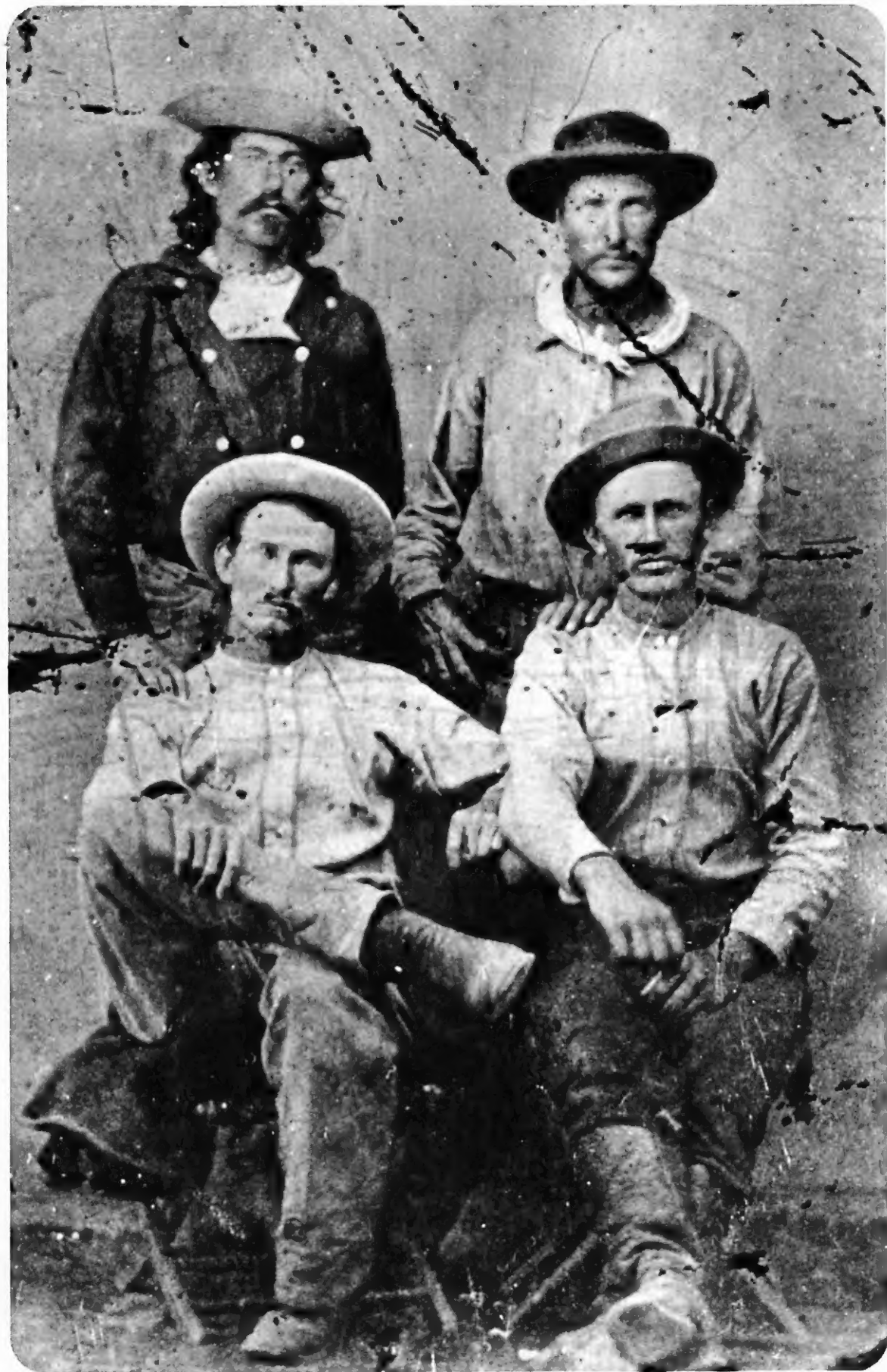
Despite commercial catastrophe, the venture enjoyed esteem in its day as in our own. Thus when the last mochila was delivered, San Francisco's *Pacific* spoke for many in a sad recession to the faithful pony:

"You came to us often with tidings that made your feet beautiful on . . . the mountains. . . . We have looked for you as those who wait for the morning, and how seldom did you fail us! When days were months and hours weeks, how you thrilled us out of our pain and suspense, to know the best or know the worst! You have served us well!" □









PONY EXPRESS STABLES MUSEUM. ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI (BOTH)



live the life I had before," Mrs. Yang said, mixing Chinese and the English she learned from missionary teachers. She could have a car, but thinks repairs and finding a chauffeur would be too troublesome.

"Former capitalists" is the term officials apply to Mrs. Yang, a pleasant gray-haired woman, and her husband, a 1930 graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Former? If the couple's Chinese yuan could be converted into dollars it would amount to six figures.

Mrs. Yang's father and his brother, said to have been China's wealthiest men, owned nine cotton mills and eight flour mills in Shanghai alone. When the Communists took over, most of her father's 16 children fled. "He wanted to stay and make a contribution to the motherland," Mrs. Yang said.

Chinese-style Communism takes strange turns. While expropriating many industrial holdings after 1949, the new regime entered into joint operation with the Yung family, then began to *buy* its properties. I was told that hundreds of former capitalists who were so treated live in comparative splendor today in Shanghai—though they suffered in the Cultural Revolution. In one foreign observer's view, the Communists cultivated liberal-minded capitalists because China needed their managerial and commercial skills. Now, seeking foreign investment, the government hopes to show that investors need not fear Chinese Communism.

"We are not capitalists now," Mrs. Yang said. "We are just two socialist workers."

**A** LONG A ROAD littered with pipe and construction debris, men walked with bedrolls. They were going to the place I was going, out to Baoshan, where Shanghai meets the Yangtze (which the Chinese here call the Chang Jiang).

Baoshan: "treasure mountain." I saw no mountain—only gray flatland. I wondered if the construction gangs had moved it.

Baoshan means something else now:

steel. Eventually, the huge mill being built here will have a capacity of six million tons, more than doubling Shanghai's output.

Steam hammers pounded, power shovels gnawed. No shortage of mechanization here. Japan furnished the necessary machinery to build Baoshan, as well as the necessary credit. But the labor is classic China. When China wants to move, China can assemble staggering numbers.

Among more than 20,000 workers at Baoshan were 6,000 soldiers, detailed to build storage areas for ore and coal. Where a coke oven's skeleton rose, I met men from Sichuan Province in the far west, hard-hatted men whose leathery faces and dangling cigarettes reminded me of confident big-project builders I have met in, say, Montana.

On the concrete slope of a vast pit, site of a rolling mill, a mouthful of slogan blazed. "Launch a Movement to Increase Production and Practice Economy With the Central Task to Raise the Standard of Quality." Exclamation point. I descended into that pit, meeting workers from an interior province, Hubei.

Three women in their early 20s leaned on shovels, waiting for the next delivery of cement. They had been at Baoshan only two months. Do you get homesick? Shy laughter. "Yes," said one.

Do you like the work? Giggles. Then, from a freckled face: "I like this job because it is important to make the mill."

In rice fields lapping at the edge of the construction site, women bent with scythes. Flails smacked and shovels tossed grain into the air. A water buffalo plodded against the dropping yellow sun.

China's greatest city has been riding a roller coaster, knowing heights of progress and depths of chaos. The burdens of old ways have been relieved but not lifted. Baoshan's steel will take China one step farther on the long road ahead, a distance of decades. "We are backward," a Baoshan engineer said, "but we won't always be."

So hopes Shanghai. □

*Once a symbol of bourgeois corruption, a birdcage adds color to Happiness Concentrated, onetime alley of brothels and opium dens. From the easy virtue of those times and the puritanical reforms that followed, a hardworking city has emerged—one that can now pause for a few of life's simpler pleasures.*